MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

BOSTON

DEPARTMENT OF PRINTS

The Intaglios of the Corona Lucis

in the Cathedral at Aix-la-Chapelle

1921

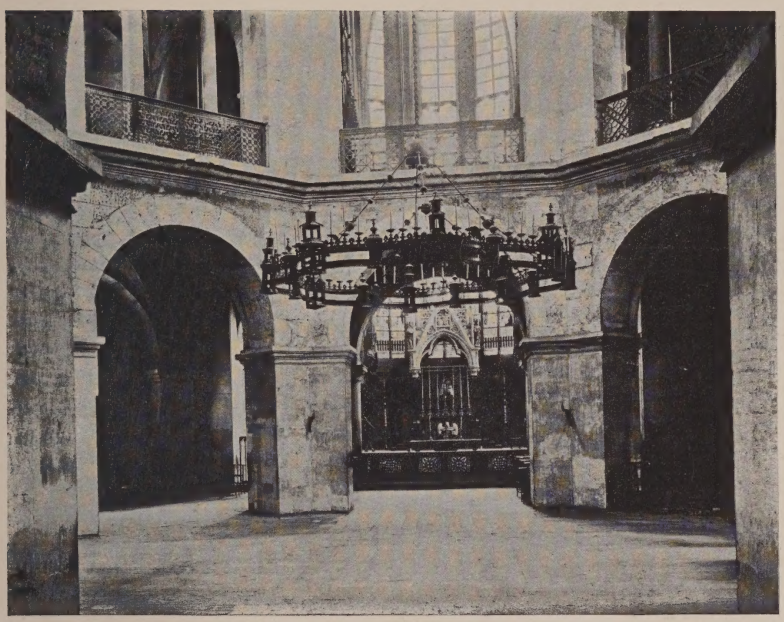
LENDING COPY

NOT TO BE TAKEN

FROM THE ROOM

The Intaglios of the Corona Lucis in the Cathedral at Aix-la-Chapelle.

Engravings before Engraving.



The Corona Lucis as it now appears.

The Print Department of the Museum has become the fortunate possessor of a set of ink impressions from sixteen intaglios upon copper executed between the years 1165 and 1170 in the region of the lower Rhine. At that date printing was still for Europe an art of the far future. The plates were engraved, not as designs to be manifolded, but as decorations for a great votive chandelier - Corona Lucis, or Crown of Light, in the phrase of the Church - which still occupies the place in the Cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle for which it was wrought nearly eight hundred years ago. About the middle of the last century, the Corona was taken down for cleaning and repair, and someone in charge, doubtless charmed by the intaglios and reluctant to see them returned to comparative oblivion above men's heads in a dim

cathedral vault, had the happy thought to use them in the interim for printing a limited number of sets after the manner of the modern engraver. A few years afterward Dr. Fr. Bock, Honorary Canon of the Cathedral, had other impressions made for a monograph which he devoted to the Corona.* Sets of these engravings before engraving are preserved in the British Museum, in Berlin and elsewhere; and one of those from Dr. Bock's book has just been acquired by the Museum. Strange as the new use of his intaglios might appear to the twelfth century metal worker, he would doubtless be pleased that they can now, by proxy at least, meet other eyes than those of worshippers, or even than the All-seeing Eye whose blessing upon his work was its chief reward.

The place, the occasion and the persons for which the Corona Lucis of Aix was made were all of exceptional historical importance. The place was the tomb of Charlemagne within the Cathedral founded by him; the occasion was supposedly a solemn exposition of his ashes; and the persons his Hohenstaufen successor, Frederick I, Barbarossa, styled in an inscription upon the Corona "Caesar Catholicus Romanorum Fredericus", and the Empress Beatrix.

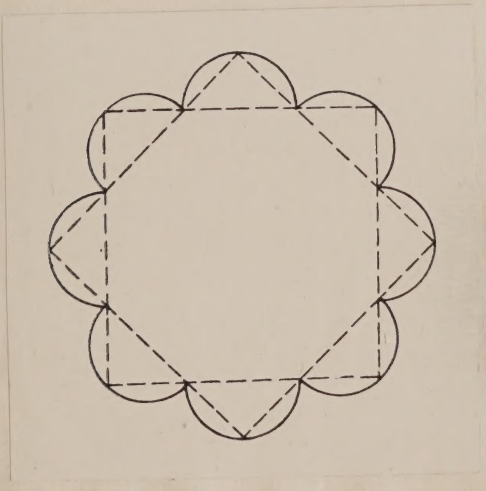
The inscription relates that the Corona was intended as a symbol of the celestial city - the city that "had no need of the sun neither of the moon to shine upon it", "having the glory of God". The Heavenly Jerusalem was to be set

---

* "Der Kronleuchter Kaisers Friedrich Barbarossa im Karolingischen Münster zu Aachen", Dr.Fr. Bock, Ehren, Stiftsherr, etc. Aachen 1863, folio. Ten years before, M. Ch. Cahier had made the Corona the subject of a learned, entertaining and instructive study containing engravings of all the intaglios: "Couronne de Lumière d'Aix la Chapelle et monuments analogues du Moyen Age" in "Mélanges d'Archélogie, Ch. Cahier and A. Martin, Vol. III, pp. 1-62; Planches I-XII. Paris, 1853.

forth under the chosen semblance; "Celica Jherusalem signatur imagine tali". The custom had grown up during previous centuries of suspending a cross over the high altar of churches and above it a crown in which candles were fixed as in similar circular bands of metal in churches today. One of these ancient coronae survived until the French Revolution at S. Rémy in Rheims. Another, still hanging in the Cathedral at Hildesheim in Germany, dating from a century before the Corona at Aix, represents the gates of the Heavenly City upon the copper band conceived as walls. These gates the larger Corona at Aix, thirteen feet in diameter, transformed into tower gates and supplemented with corner towers, as shown in the illustration above.

The Cathedral at Aix-la-Chapelle is octagonal, as the inscription upon the Corona notes, and the problem was to adapt a crown to an octagon. It was the description of the Heavenly City itself in the Revelation - lying four square with three gates on each side - that appears to have furnished the designer with the key to his problem. The inner outline of



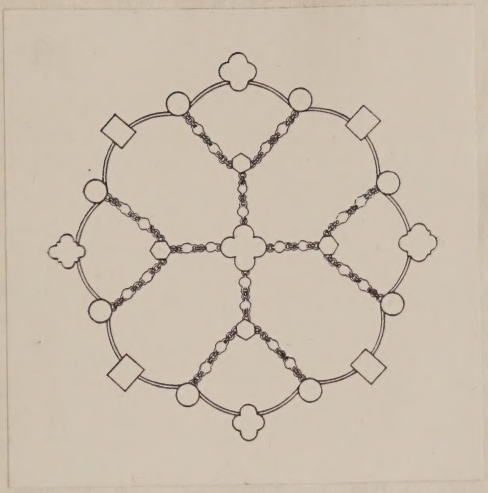
Scheme of the Corona.

a figure formed by turning a square upon itself through half a right angle is an octagon; moreover, between any two corners of the square in either of its positions three points are determined, a corner of the square in the other

position and the intersection of the sides of the two. The designer had only to place towers at all these points: at the intersections, smaller gate towers, and at the corners of the squares larger towers which should represent either corner towers or gate towers, according as the Corona was looked at between, or in front of, any one of them. The projecting corners of the squares were then developed into semi-circles, and the union of the idea of a crown with a battlemented city was complete, as shown in the accompanying diagram.

In the towers were placed silver statuettes of biblical personages, representing inhabitants of the Celestial City, and in the upper storeys of the larger among them, lamps appear to have been installed. The frame of the Corona is elaborately ornamented. Forty-eight candles in bobèches surmount the upper rim. The inscription runs above and below the vacant space between the rims. This space was originally filled with openwork ornament in silver; but the Corona was despoiled of both statuettes and ornament at the time of the invasion of Aix by the soldiers of the French Revolution. With its lamps and candles and its shining and varied surfaces the Corona lighted must once have been a beautiful sight, and to the people of the twelfth century an overwhelming luxury of illumination truly imaging the city of light. The rigid St. Bernard of Clairvaux even deprecated the great size of such chandeliers, calling them "wheels" (rotas) in contempt. The Cathedral records show that the Corona at Aix was used for the illumination of the church at festivals. In bequests received for services on other anniversaries it was sometimes specified "the Corona shall be lighted". It witnessed and doubtless also helped to make brilliant the coronation of the emperors at Aix during seven hundred years.

The form of the Corona contains another symbolism. If we join the central point of its plan, representing the chain of suspension, with other branching chains directed first to the corners of the squares, a figure appears



Plan of the Corona

like a flower of four petals with four others partly showing between them, as ~~appears~~ in the accompanying ~~general plan of the Corona.~~ illustratio For reasons deep hidden in the heart of mediaeval Christianity, Heaven was often thought of under the aspect of a rose. A century and a half later the assembly of the Blessed was to be called a rose in the Divina Commedia, its golden center the throne of Divinity itself; and Orcagna was to depict the fancy on the walls of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Here in the Corona at Aix the idea is at its inception and blends the suave suggestions of a descending flower with the majesty of gleaming towers and walls.

To the eye of a beholder from below, the sixteen towers are completed by metal plates representing their bases; and it is these plates fixed horizontally that were engraved and are represented in reverse in the set of prints. A seventeenth plate not included hangs under the central sphere from which the supporting rods radiate and is painted in brown and black with an image of St. Michael, according to Greek tradition the foremost of the angels, the heavenly warlord, he who brings, as Gabriel summons, all souls to the Last Judgment. The eight towers representing gates only and placed at the points withdrawn between the petals of the rose have circular bases about 7 1/2 inches in diameter. Of the remaining

eight, representing corner towers or tower gates, according to the place of the beholder, those at the corners of one square have rectangular bases about 8 by 9 1/2 inches, those at the corners of the other, bases in the form of a quatrefoil about 9 1/2 by 10 1/2 inches. The bases of the larger towers were pierced like gratings, perhaps to let light through from the lamps and candles, and the bars and the openings reappear in the prints. The smaller openings irregularly placed are holes through which the bolts are passed that fasten the plate to the base of the tower. When the paper was pressed upon the copper, the depressed edges of these holes left it roughened and irregularly inked.

The bases of the smaller towers, which are solid circular plates, afforded appropriate fields for the representation of a series of scenes. It was upon these that the designer chose to depict episodes of the life that was itself the Way to the Celestial City imaged above. Eight plates remain: the rectangles and the quatrefoil, and as it happens, the blessings of the Master upon those who truly follow in the Way he set forth were also eight in number. On each of the larger plates, accordingly, was represented a figure holding a scroll bearing in an abbreviated Latin text one of the Beatitudes. Since, in the process of taking the impressions, right is necessarily turned into left, all these texts read backward in the prints.

Different hands apparently have coöperated in the intaglios; but in some of them there appear figures, attitudes, dress, faces and expressions which we should accept today as ideally appropriate to such scenes. Evidence that we are not reading into them more than the designers felt and imagined and meant beholders to feel and see appears in the marked difference in artistic level between the four scenes of mainly theological interest and the four that chiefly tell a human story. The scene of the Crucifixion is theologically treated. The designer closely follows Byzantine tradition - the feet nailed separatly on a supporting board, the ample loin cloth, the sun and moon personified as mourners - and rather than add other personages than the Virgin and the beloved disciple filled the space beyond with safe Byzantine motives - two trees

artificially dwarfed. Little enthusiasm remained in him for any of the figures, with one notable exception; for, in the head of Christ the surrounding conventionalities and even their scale seem forgotten, and a noble and powerful countenance in dignified rest becomes the over-balancing focus of the composition. The last three scenes of the series, which are exclusively theological in import, are more conventional and, with the exception of the scene of Pentecost, lower in artistic level. The warmth of the designer's zeal could not maintain itself under the mass of tradition that ruled representations of the Ascension and of Christ enthroned. In the former, the figure of Christ bearing a banner on a crozier leaves the earth amid flying flames. The disciples look upward with heads twisted to the horizontal after the extravagant Greek tradition, and the artist has had no impulse to make them more than masks. One detail shows an incipient liberation from Greek models. In Byzantine art the Ascension is the Resumption (ἀνάληψις), and the hand of the Father grasps that of the Son; while here it seems only to give a benediction - albeit with the closed thumb after the Greek manner. The designer seems much more interested in the line of faces and figures represented in the scene of Pentecost. There is care and inventiveness in the bodies and character and variety in the heads; and the scene is conceived in a decorative sense. The series of theological subjects closes with the wholly emblematic scene called "Majestas Domini", in which Christ is represented with a book and the globe of sovereignty, the letters Alpha and Omega and the symbols of the four evangelists. It is hardly an accident that, with the departure of all mundane interest from his work, the designer's hand touches its lowest level of thought and care. Perhaps, indeed, another hand was here at work.

Turning from this perfunctory achievement to any one of the four remaining scenes of chiefly human appeal, we find ourselves in the presence of genuine work done with a glow and dexterity that carries perfectly across eight centuries. It is not surprising that a commission from the then head of the Holy Roman Empire should have engaged the efforts of the

foremost designers. ~~The specimens from~~ Other monuments of the time ~~which are here reproduced~~ show the artists of the Corona when at their best as at least the equals of any contemporaries. We are again reminded that what the present knows is but little of what the past produced. The cheap material and inconspicuous position of these intaglios saved them; but had they been prominent and of precious metal, like the statuettes and other ornament of the Corona, the world would have forever lacked a notable witness to the quality of the artistic impulses moving in the twelfth century in northern Europe beneath the crust of an alien tradition.

The personages in all these scenes are well-favored, well-built beings with comely hands and feet and rounded and expressive features. Of the frowns and angularity of the Byzantine mosaics there is no trace, nor of the Burne-Jones-like emaciation or Beardsley-like longitude that even the glass-workers of Vendome still felt the necessary mark of sacred quality. Their mien and their movements simply and intimately reveal the familiar wonders they depict. The Virgin of the Annunciation bends a girlish head and raises graceful hands as she shrinks before the message of the angel. His features are delicately differentiated from hers; he is still moving, with wings just closing. As he stands and gazes, so might any noble young herald of solemn and joyful tidings have stood and gazed in the streets of Aix-la-Chapelle.

In the scene of the Nativity Mary is already Madonna, a woman mature, serene and conscious of the dignity vouchsafed her. In her look one reads the words of the Magnificat. The Juonian conception of the Madonna, queenly in posture and pose, which was first wrought in stone in Pisa just a century afterward, is already dawning far away in this minute and almost furtive fashion.

Mary becomes fully the queen in the scene of the Adoration, holding up her own hand in salutation to the kneeling kings while the Child blesses them. The veiled hand of the first king represents an ancient tradition of Eastern Christianity, doubtless with ceremonial significance. The tradition reappears

elsewhere in the intaglios. In both this scene and the preceding the tumbled hair of the Infant contrasts with the impeccably and even decoratively disposed locks of his mother and her visitors. In what region, one wonders, did the unknown engraver of this episode find models for the élite of earth that he has represented here?

In the remaining plate, that of the Women at the Sepulchre, the figures are again carefully characterized to accord with the story they image. The two Marys and Salome with their jars of spices are unassuming people in appearance and bearing. While the first halts at sight of the angel, placing her hand on her breast, the second and third still move forward, the last peering over the shoulder of her predecessor with an air of inquiry. The angel, bearing his lily wand and seated on the edge of the tomb, points into it. The serious quiet of his face reflects the peace of the place, the hour and the occasion. The designer has chosen to represent him of slender make with very delicate feet and to give him an angular pose. This pose and his wings - hardly explicable in their contortion unless so placed for some symbolic purpose or possibly to fill out the field of the intaglio - give the relief all the little flavor it possesses of ecclesiastical tradition. * Otherwise we should be glad to fancy any pious women of some lofty race thus met by another of their blood on watch over an empty tomb. Yet it must not be forgotten that to the draftsman of this scene, as well as to those for whom it was drawn, the empty tomb had been the abode of divinity and the women were halting in awe before a more than earthly apparition.

The piercing of the fields upon which the Beatitudes were to be displayed made the designer's task of necessity chiefly one of

---

* M. Cahier notes a resemblance between the ruffled wings of the angel in this scene and the way in which he is represented in a Byzantino Syriac mss. from the Grande Chartreuse now in the British Museum.

ornamentation. The opportunity before him was to vary the pattern formed by the interlacing bars and the decoration with which they were covered. The single figure holding the scroll with its abbreviated Latin text played an ideal rôle and is conceived in statuesque fashion on a large scale. For the most part it appears the work of a less skilful hand. The three plates in which the pattern of the bars is varied from the regular network of all the others ~~are here reproduced and~~ show the ingenuity of the designer. In all three the inscription is partly effaced on account doubtless of the oxidation of the copper. Since these three alone show groups of attendant figures - either hearers of the Word or those upon whom its blessing rests - we are tempted to infer that the designer was the artist of the scenes of Christ's earthly life. The most complex design is perhaps that of the Blessing on the Meek where, by a naïve fancy, one of the hearers hesitatingly grasps the edge of the Angel's mandorla; the most boldly graceful is perhaps that of the Blessing on the Seekers after Righteousness; the most deeply felt that of the Blessing on those that Mourn. These angels have almost the air of figures by Ghiberti, and the varied attitudes, features and drapery of the clustered groups appear the sign manual of quite as independent and intelligent a craftsman as the designer of the best of the historical plates.

The Romanesque fondness for luxurious interlacing patterns of the most varied kinds, which was to sober down through the coming Gothic age into the development of a single germinal idea - that of the pointed arch - is given full play in the ornamental borders of all the fields and over the bars of the squares and quatrefoils. The designer repeats himself comparatively little, and the flowing lines he traces are sometimes of consummate grace. The Romanesque artists inherited their freedom of formal imagination among other gifts from Byzance. Their ornament has a barbaric richness that betokens the amateur, the man of many ideas imperfectly carried out, but though we may find their successors more finished artists, there is a spirit of spendthrift youth in the work of the Romanesque decorators that stirs the mind by its promise while charming the eye by its performance.

25 f